

BREAKING OPEN THE SEALS: AN OUTLOOK ON THE BOOK OF REVELATION AND ITS ARTISTIC INSPIRATION

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ABSTRACT

The last book of the Bible is the most enigmatic of all the other texts. It is the most literary and the one which has inspired art, literature and architecture for many centuries. The vocabulary of Revelation has crept into popular culture too. Nobody is unfamiliar with “Armageddon”, “Babylon” or “the Beast”, which are all borrowed from The Book of Revelation or The Book of Apocalypse. This paper tries to examine the apocalyptic tradition to which Revelation belongs, and its literary quality.

KEYWORDS: *The Bible, The Book of Revelation Apocalyptic Literature Revelation & Art*

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INTRODUCTION

The Book of Apocalypse or The Book of Revelation was written by John, with a specific address to seven churches that were spread across the western half of Asia Minor in the first century. This refers to the Roman Province of Asia, which is the western part of Asia Minor, or modern day Turkey. The Book of Revelation is supposed to use the most twisted plot pattern among all the books of the Bible. The intricate style of narration, imagery, symbolism and language escapes logical description. This paper aims to examine the features of apocalyptic literature in the Bible, and how Revelation as an epitome of this tradition has influenced literature and other forms of art.

The writer, who calls himself “John”, addresses the minority group of first century Christians through letters at the beginning of Revelation. The persecution of Christians continued for almost two hundred years under the Roman regime. The majority of the theologians agree that The Book of Revelation, widely known as Revelation, was written around 95 or 96 A.D, almost towards the end of Emperor Domitian’s tyrannical rule between 81 and 96 A.D. The city of Rome is referred to as “Babylon” in Rev.17.5 and 9. It is identified as a city on seven hills and symbolically stands for Rome of those days. Such a manner of referring to Rome as Babylon, the exile land of the early Israel, was developed in Judaism after 70 A.D, when the Romans destroyed the Jewish Temple and Jerusalem.

There are debates regarding the identity of the writer of The Book of Revelation. Earlier, many Church Fathers like Justin Martyr (*Dialogue*), Irenaeus (*Against Heresies*), Tertullian (*Against Marcion*) and Clement of Alexandria (*Miscellanies*) believed that it was Jesus’ disciple St. John, who wrote Revelation. But, this idea was contended, since the other writings attributed to him and canonized much earlier (The Gospel according to John and Epistles of John) used consistently and better Greek, when compared to that in Revelation. There were also differences in writing style, tone and the teachings of the end times as stylometric analysis, which compares the

style of different writings shows. The motifs, symbols and images used in the Gospel, according to John, when compared to Revelation are different. In the third century, Bishop Dionysius of Alexandria rejected the idea that, Revelation was authored by John the apostle, and said it was by John the Presbyter, teacher of Papias, the bishop of Hieropolis. In “Revelation: Introduction” of *The New American Bible* we read that church fathers like John Chrysostom, Cyril of Jerusalem, Denis of Alexandria, Eusebius of Caesarea and Gregory Nazianzen shared similar ideas (386). Many critics argued that the text was written by an elder of the church under the pseudonym of St John, the apostle. It was a common practice to write apocalyptic literature, the genre to which Revelation belongs, using pseudonyms. Thus the name “John” may be a pseudonym to refer to a writer who followed the apocalyptic tradition. The title name of an apostle gave credibility to the writing, which was otherwise of lesser value. In the fourth century, when the canonical texts of the Bible were finalized, it was done in the belief that it is St. John, the disciple and apostle chosen by Jesus, who authored the text. It was a necessity since apostolic authorship was a primary need for the inclusion of the text in the canonical Bible, as was mentioned in Chapter One. But, after the advent of contemporary theories in biblical studies, many biblical scholars debate on the issue of authorship of Revelation.

It can be safely concluded that “John” refers to an elder of authority in the churches in the Roman province of Asia Minor. He was in exile on the island of Patmos, maybe for his teachings or misbehaving with the imperial rule. His Greek was not perfect, but he was thorough with the Hebrew Bible. The OT quotations, images and concepts in Revelation prove the same.

The Book of Revelation is considered by scholars as the text which represents apocalyptic literature, and is so also referred as The Book of Apocalypse. Apocalypse, translated from Greek “apocalypse”, means “uncovering” or “revealing”. It is a literary genre, both in the Old Testament and New Testament. Passages in The Book of Ezekiel (chapters 38-39), The Book of Isaiah (chapters 24-27, 33-35), The Book of Zechariah (chapters 12-14) and The Book of Daniel (chapters 7-12) are examples of apocalyptic texts of the OT. A few of apocryphal texts or non-canonical OT texts are Apocalypse of Abraham, Apocalypse of Adam, the Apocalypse of Baruch, Apocalypse of Lamech, Apocalypse of Moses and Apocalypse of Elijah. In the New Testament, a few passages of the Gospels (for example, Mark.13, Matt.24, 2 Thes.2) and The Book of Revelation are classified as apocalyptic literature. The Book of Revelation was the last book to be included in the canon. Several images and symbols, and the ideas regarding end time and rebirth of the world, suggested by the text attempt to vary from Christian ethics of love, as taught by Jesus Christ, and so were debated in many of the councils if it is to be included in the canon.

Apocalyptic Literature is not a modern literary genre. It was a common type of writing in Judaism during the middle Hellenistic Period (Second century B.C.E – second century C.E.). According to Collins’ (1992), “Early Jewish Apocalypticism”, apocalypse is a genre of “revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient” (p. 283). Apocalyptic books like The Book of Revelation are characteristically visionary, containing symbols and images which are interpreted by a heavenly mediator. As mentioned earlier, the authors of apocalypse, sometimes use pseudonyms, claiming names of venerated heroes (such as Enoch, Abraham, Ezra) who lived maybe centuries before the actual compilation of the text. The spatial scope of apocalypse is cosmic, and characters shift between heaven, earth and hell. Conflict and war scenes involve angels, demon and human armies. The ultimate victory won by the deity happens at the end of the persecution of a small group or the minority. The realization of a utopian world is experienced by the minority group when the deity wins the battle. Apocalyptic writers talk

not only about the end times, but also about the past and the present, and their significance. They sometimes bring in the feeling of an imminent end time which gives a sense of urgency to the prophet's message. In an apocalyptic clime, ultimately the good triumphs over the evil, and thereby maintains poetic justice. Personification of the evil force and good force is also typical of apocalyptic literature.

Collins (1998) opines that, Jewish Apocalypticism first emerged in the Hellenistic Age and was influenced by the Canaanite and Mesopotamian interest in a heavenly council, the Chaldean interest in dreams and their interpretations (which refers to mythologies of ancient Sumer, Babylon, Akkad and Assyria), Akkadian prophecy (ancient, near eastern prophecies with references to royal and apocalyptic ideology) written in Assyrian and Babylonian dialects and the Persian apocalyptic tradition (p. 284-86). The Book of Daniel, which is an example for apocalyptic writings, speaks the story of a young Jew captured after a war with Egypt and was taken to the King's palace, but refused to commit sin to Yahweh by eating the food offered at the King's table which was detested by Jews. The aim of Jewish apocalyptic is resistance to cultural appropriation with Greek and other alien cultures. Jewish apocalypticism also finds expression in the prophetic traditions of Isaiah, Ezekiel and Jeremiah, during the exilic and post-exilic periods. They tried to instill hope in the people by portraying Yahweh as a divine warrior, in the model of Baal, the Canaanite god of the storm; they were familiar with, and also based on many earlier depictions in the earlier OT texts. Arnold (2008) in "Old Testament Eschatology and the Rise of Apocalypticism" emphasizes the influence of Zoroastrianism and the prophetic literature of the Bible upon apocalyptic writings (p. 31). Zoroastrianism, the religion of the Persian Empire, which reined till Alexander the Great conquered in 335 BCE, viewed world history as a cosmic conflict between the good god, Ahura Mazda and the evil god, Ahura Mainyu. In the final times, there will be a progressive triumph of the good over the evil. A final savior will appear, who will raise the dead and all humanity will assemble for the judgment of their deeds, and the sinners will be punished in hell. The cosmos will be transformed and there will be an immortal existence of the righteous in the new world. A deep study of apocalyptic literatures shows that Zoroastrian tradition had a tremendous influence on Jewish Apocalyptic literature which flourished in the period of struggle against Roman and Greek empires.

The prophetic traditions during the exilic period of the Jewish history also helped to form apocalyptic literature, as seen in the Book of Daniel. In the second century B.C.E, much of the social struggle over how to resist empire and the powerful imagery generated by the divine warrior, crept into The Book of Daniel. The revelation was not the only apocalyptic text during its time. 4 Ezra (70-100 C.E.), 2 Baruch (70-100 C.E.), Fifth Syballine Oracle (70-100 C.E.) and the Dead Sea Scrolls (100 B.C.E -50 C.E) are the other apocalyptic writings of the first century. One theme found common in all these texts is that, the Roman Empire is portrayed as Babylon, the original enemy of Israel of OT, and its lure to appropriating its culture must be resisted by those who are faithful to the ways of God. Many images in Revelation appear in these texts also, as illustrated in *Unveiling Empire: Reading Revelation, Then and Now* (p. 77-81) by Wes Howard-Brook and Anthony Gwyther (1999).

"Eschatology" is a term closely related to apocalyptic literature. From the Greek "eschatos", which means "last", eschatology is a branch, which is devoted to the study of last or final things, such as the death and judgment, heaven and hell, and the end of the world. Thus it focuses on the end of times and is concerned with the final stages of human existence. But a basic distinction is to be maintained between apocalypse and eschatology. While eschatology refers to the end, apocalyptic literature is concerned with the revelation of a mystery which is a body of knowledge which may have nothing to do with end-time concerns. In other words, the symbolism of the apocalyptic literature can be used without its

eschatological dimension.

“End times” was an important concept for the first century Christians, since they were expecting Jesus to return and save them from the present turbulent crisis. In other words, they expected a final judgment and their redemption in the very near future. In a way, Revelation was given the hope of the ultimate triumph of Christ over the evil powers of the world. That Jesus also mentioned about the end times, was another reason for the same. In Matthew.24 we find a detailed description of Jesus about the “coming of the Son of Man” (Matt.24. 37). It was an answer to his disciples' question about the signs of the end times (Matt.24.2-4). Jesus replies that wars, pestilence, famine and earthquakes will be just the beginning signs of the last times. He also says that his followers will be persecuted. Many false prophets will arise, and only those who stand firm to the true teaching will be saved when the Son of Man appears to judge the world. As in Matt.24, Jesus affirms the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in Luke.21.5, 6 and 20 also. The message is the same- destruction of Jerusalem (which happened in 70 A.D.), war and famine, persecution and the coming of the Son of Man. Jesus concludes, “Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you suddenly like a trap... Be always on the watch, and pray that you will be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man” (Luke.21.34-36). Paul, the apostle whose epistles are the majority in number in the NT, also said that the Son of Man will appear soon. He assures that the dead will be raised to life, and thus there will be an ultimate victory over Death (1 Cor.15.53-55). And so the living community who reads the letter is encouraged to stand firm in their faith (1 Cor.15.56-58). The imminent hope of the apostle, which reflects that of the Christian community of the first century, is conveyed in the verse which says, “We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed-in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye” (1 Cor.15.51, 52). It implies that the apostle too believes that, the coming of the Son of Man to destroy all the diabolic powers (1 Cor.15.24-28), and establish the Kingdom will happen while he is alive. He concludes with the hope that martyrs for the sake of the Kingdom will be raised to life again (1 Cor.15.52, 54). He repeats the same in his first letter to Thessalonians. 4. 13-18. In the epistle of Peter, he exhorts readers to be prepared for the day of the Lord (2 Peter.3.1-10).

Apocalyptic writers try to instill hope in the believers that their persecution will have an end and they need to strive till the Son of Man appears. The end happens with the arrival of a savior, who redeems them from the opposing forces. The redeemer offers a glorious future. According to Rowland (2008), the criticism of the present hegemony by which the community is oppressed is done by “the use of a contrast between the glories of the future and the inadequacy of the present” (p. 63). Such a criticism is offered in the midst of a variety of crises. Collins (1984) opines, “Apocalyptic literature is often defined as literature evoked by crisis” (84). It arises in the midst of tribulation, rendering hope and support to the persecuted minority, which instill in them hope and the spirit of resistance to the hegemony. It stands as a support in the face of persecution (Daniel and Revelation), reassurance in the face of social powerlessness (*Similitudes of Enoch*), reorientation in the face of humanity (*4 Ezra*) (Collins 287). It encourages the readers to resist the influence of empire and its control. For instance, as mentioned earlier, The Book of Daniel, a Jewish Apocalyptic text, was written during the time of persecution under Antiochus IV Epiphanes, who was attempting to stamp out Jewish religious observances. The Book of Revelation, a Christian Apocalyptic, was written during the persecution of the Roman powers. But in Jewish Apocalyptic, the final kingdom to be ushered in is worldly, which will be ruled by a Messiah. In case of a Christian Apocalyptic, the vision is more spiritual and interpretations tend to give importance to a recreated co-existence of the earth and the heaven, a kind of utopia.

Symbolism is the predominant literary technique in an apocalypse. According to Pablo Richard (1995), myths in apocalypse embrace both cosmic and human realities i.e., the sun, moon, stars, earthquakes, beasts coming out of the abyss, twenty four elders, human figures, the prostitute etc. (p. 29). The author uses metaphoric images to point to something else. For example the image of “lamb” in The Book of Revelation personifies the purity and suffering of Jesus Christ. It is also a symbol to signify the OT sacrifices which were considered as a means for atonement of sin. Symbols with apocalypse help in giving rise to polysemic meanings and can communicate different messages at the same time (Richard, 1995, p 30). These symbols become relevant only when interpreted variously in contemporary contexts, with the historic significance in mind. Bernard McGinn (1987) in “Revelation” says, “... apocalyptic literature introduced ambiguity and polyvalence that increase fascination while compounding obscurity, and that help explain why modern theorists of symbolism, both psychological and literary, have been so interested in the Book of Revelation” (p. 325). Thus, the slain lamb becomes a representative of any community or person who is marginalized or mutilated on the basis of caste, class, creed or gender. Such opaque language offers wider scope for making the Book of Revelation an open-ended text. It is also why Revelation is a text which is reflected in contemporary popular fiction and the arts. The images can be borrowed and appropriated in paintings, arts, films and videos since these are appealing to the eyes. It was also a tool of the first century to provide an identity and to mobilize a specific group (Mc Ginn, 1987, p. 30). In times of persecution or oppression, an apocalyptic vision of a utopian world gives the oppressed group to create a discourse, and an alternative community. Thus, these symbols are not passive or alienating, but active and engaging.

The Book of Revelation has been instrumental in constituting the genres of apocalyptic fiction and post-apocalyptic fiction. The former is a subgenre of science fiction with stories of the destruction of the world with nuclear weapons, extraterrestrial attacks, climate changes, supernatural phenomena, ecological disaster or some other catastrophe. Post-apocalyptic fiction deals with the time frame of events after the destruction of the world, focusing on the psychological framework of the survivors, and the setting is often agrarian with little use of technology. *The Last Man* (1826) by Mary Shelly, *Empty World* (1977) by John Christopher, *Emergence* (1984) by David R. Palmer, *Oryx and Crake* (2003) by Margaret Atwood and Cormac McCarthy’s *Road* (2006) are a few examples belonging to the above mentioned genres in literature. Jean – Baptiste Cousin de Grainville’s *Le Dernier Homme*, translated as *The Last Man* (1805) draws heavily from apocalyptic images in The Book of Revelation, combined with the story of Adam and Eve. The Hungarian author, Laszlo Krasznahorkai was presented the Man Booker International Prize 2015, which is given once in two years, in recognition of a writer’s body of works, instead of a single work. Parvathi Menon (2015) reported that his works deal with “dystopian and apocalyptic themes in which an impending civilisational crisis threatens the world” (p. 18). In a write up “Why are many of the Hottest Writers writing Post Apocalyptic Books?”, Charlie Jane Anders (2014) lists the answers given by five major post-apocalyptic authors: Peter Heller, who wrote *The Dog-Stars* says that literature has to capture the predicted end of a great sin which has obliterated many species from the world and is possible with themes of apocalypse. Emilie St. John Mandel, whose *Station Eleven* was selected among the finalists for a National Book Award in 2014 says that she wants her readers to imagine a world where we do not have what we have today. In other words, she intended it as a requiem. Hugh Howey, the author of Wool series says apocalyptic literature is a way to satirize or comment on the mistakes we make over and over again. Edan Lepucki’s *California* tries to sketch a romantic life in spite of a destroyed world. M R Carey who wrote *The Girl with All the Gifts* opines that writing a post-apocalyptic fiction is like writing down a documentary report. It seems that, the apocalypse is happening all around the world.

Many images in The Book of Revelation were adopted by artists of different centuries. The visual imagery of the

text appeals to the eyes of all centuries. Bernard Mc Ginn (1987) says, “The book [Revelation] having long exerted so strong an influence on art and literature might itself be viewed primarily as an imaginative creation, as a work of literature rather than as a repository of truths about the course of history and the events of the end” (p. 539). The Medieval and Renaissance periods were indebted to the eschatological or the end time concepts prevalent in the Book of Revelation. The art period during the Middle and Renaissance era was influenced by the Roman Catholic Church dominated with its concerns on the crucifixion and resurrection, judgment, purgatory, hell and heaven which were borrowed from Revelation. Heidi J. Hornik (2008) in “Eschatology in Fine Art,” says that the art of this period can be divided according to “the crucifixion and resurrection (individual death); the harrowing of hell (individual purgatory); the last judgment (particular/individual and general/universal) with depictions of heaven and hell (individual); scenes from the Book of Revelation; the approach of the end of the world (universal); the new Jerusalem (universal)” (p. 630). This eschatological drama is combined into one piece in St Maria Assunta, Torcello. The scenes mentioned above are shown in five different sections with angels, the Virgin Mary, Joseph, St Peter, saints, demons, sea creatures, river of fire, hell and worms crawling through the eyes of dismembered heads waiting to become skulls. This mosaic portrayed the teachings of the church and its eschatology as one united composition. Frequently the individual scenes are viewed as complete works of art themselves.

Hornik (2008) opines that, images in Revelation including “four horsemen and the opening of the seven seals, the beast, the Antichrist, the devil, and the damned are among those end-of-the-world-as-we-know-it subjects” which found popularity in Middle and Renaissance manuscript illuminations, engravings, tapestries, altar panels and fresco cycles (p. 646). *The Church Militant, the Church Triumphant, Via Veritatis* (1368), a fresco by Andrea DA Firenze in the Spanish Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, is based on the creation of a new heaven and earth, a belief which was propagated by interpretations of Rev.21. Matthias Scheits, a seventeenth century German baroque painter has sketched the scenes in Revelation as *The Bowls, the Dragon, the Woman on the Beast and the fall of Babylon*. *The Four Horsemen* by Albrecht Dürer is a classic example of the same depicting the scenes in Rev. 6. 1-8. *Apocalypse with Pictures* (1498) is a noted series of fifteen woodcuts by Dürer depicting the different scenes in Revelation of which *The Four Horsemen* became famous among the artistic works of the time. In the 1920s, Edouard Goerg, a French artist portrayed his expressionist themes with emphasis on the stark realities of the First World War by the name *The Apocalypse*. Benton Spruance’s lithograph *Riders of Apocalypse* (1943) sketched the harsh realities after the Second World War. Klaus Koch in *The Rediscovery of Apocalypse* says, “With the help of apocalyptic images, poets and painters express their despair over the dark side of life” (112). Thus, whether in an artwork of Medieval Age or the postmodern era, themes of death, destruction and rebirth in The Book of Revelation still find a place in aesthetic sensibility.

Klaus Koch (1974) in *The Rediscovery of the Apocalypse* says, “Apocalyptic is one of the few theological terms which have been absorbed into the jargon of mass media” (119). For example, the use of epidemic and disaster in the apocalypse, and the war scenes of Revelation have provided themes for books and films. According to John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett’s work (2002), *The Myth of the American Superhero*, the dominant postmillennial paradigm found in most of the superhero stories from the 1930s through the 1970s followed the following pattern:

A community in a harmonious paradise is threatened by evil; normal institutions fail to contend with this threat; a selfless superhero emerges, renouncing temptations and thereby gaining strength for the redemptive task; aided by fate, his decisive victory restores the community to its paradisiacal condition; the superhero then recedes into obscurity (6).

Within popular culture, especially American, this form took on its simplest form, in radio (the *Lone Ranger*), comics (*Superman*), films and television serials. It became common in action/adventure genres with *Pale Rider* (1985), *Armageddon* (1998), *The Matrix* (1999), *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991) and *the End of Days* (1999). *Star Wars* still stand at the center of popular culture.

Franchised action figures, dolls and toys permeate the global market, which features many of the apocalyptic characters reflected in the films and books. A report titled “Goddess of Thunder? Thor Undergoes Sex Change” (2014) in *The Hindu* newspaper featured the introduction of “female Thor”, whom the editor of the comic series Will Moss considers not simply as a female substitute for the male god of Thunder called Thor. He says, “She’s now the one and only Thor, and she is worth!” (p. 7). He continued that it is high time to re-read the inscription on male Thor’s hammer: Whoever holds this hammer, if HE be worthy, shall possess the power of Thor” (p. 7). He wants the female Thor to re-narrate the story. The inscription reminds us of a verse from The Book of Revelation: “Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth, wisdom and strength” (Rev.5.12). Here, it refers to Jesus Christ, who is declared as worthy to break open the seals and open a scroll. In a recent internet article “Oscar Isaac Compares X-Men Villain Apocalypse to a Cult Leader” by Adam Holmes on the upcoming X-Men series titled *X-Men: Apocalypse*, the actor Oscar Isaac commented that the villain ‘Apocalypse’ is the most powerful of all enemies which X-Men have faced so far. He also said that the recruitment of Four Horsemen by Apocalypse, again an image from Revelation, shows a cult leader forming a followers’ group. The “redeemer” figure in Revelation has also infused into video games. In “Eschatology in Pop Culture”, Lawrence and Jewett say,

The interactive game technology could personalize the fantasy of apocalyptic warfare in a new way: one could be a savior and viscerally feel the weapons that redeem the innocent while destroying the evil. Makers of games have capitalized on this personalization of millennial warfare, and their advertising explicitly appeals to the player’s sense of saving humanity (662).

CONCLUSIONS

The Matrix video games with their enticing slogans like “In the war to save Zion, what role will you play?” lure children and adults into war-games. But, such an attitude enhances the militant nature of a religion, which misleads people into assuming that their faith was being reloaded by such games. As critical thinkers, those who engage in such entertainment should not be blind to the advertising techniques, with which they manipulate our minds in the name of religion.

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